The US-China Contest: Inevitable but Avoidable

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The geopolitical contending for global dominance between the U.S. and China did not begin with any one individual. That is to say, it was not a decision of one individual, such as Donald Trump or Joseph Biden. Each president has reacted to the rivalry in their ways; Trump by being adversarial, and Biden more by strategy and alliances. But after one identifies the thematic elements, one theme remains constant: there is an increasing rivalry with China.

This is important because it indicates how powerful structural forces can shape foreign policy outside of individuals. This essay offers an interpretation that fits closely with Kishore Mahbubani's optimistic interpretation of U.S.–China relations, which is very much opposed to Graham Allison's "Thucydides Trap" theory of the inevitable conflict between a rising power and an established power.

> **Geopolitical rivalry alone cannot explain the persistence of U.S.–China tensions, it is also fed by history and unfulfilled ideological expectations.**

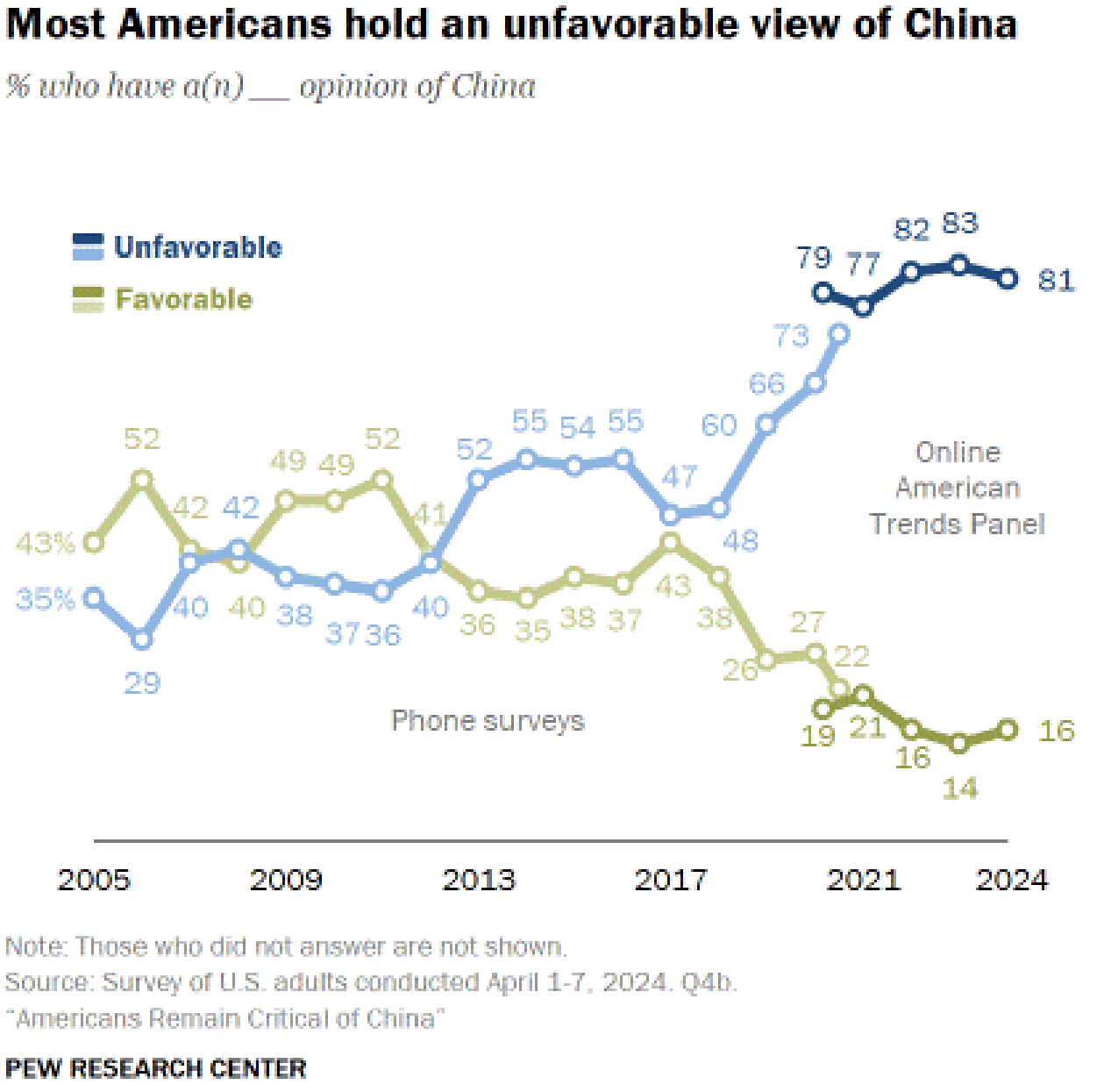
The U.S.-China rivalry is not arbitrary; it is based upon three underlying forces: geopolitical ambition, historical prejudice, and ideological disillusionment.

The first and most obvious root is geopolitical. Both nations are competing for global influence and dominance, and neither is willing to give up any strategic ground. The international system right now is so fragile and balances power between the two, with each side staking out its territory, growing its influence, and thinking about action in relation to the threats they perceive coming from the other. This security dilemma breeds a distrust between the two nations that is exacerbated by a spiraling offense and puts them at risk could stumbling into a conflict, even if at the outset neither expects or desires it. History has shown that great powers often? turn to force when they feel threatened unless the issue is moderated through purposeful diplomacy.

The second root is discussed less often- the impact of historical and cultural prejudice, especially in the West. The idea of a "Yellow Peril" is a deeply racial concept that is over 800 years old, which the US has seen some iterations in its political and cultural life. The Chinese Exclusion Act (1882) is a stark example of a law founded on prejudice and fear. While there are no longer any accompanying expressions of those attitudes, they still reside in the background of how the West can view China and generate a basis of distrust. This can muddy the waters of how both can consider rational and balanced engagement.

A third root of tension is ideological disappointment. Many in Washington assumed that China's integration into the global economic system would lead to its political liberalization. That expectation has not been met. While China has advanced

economically, its political system remains authoritarian, which frustrates American policymakers, who believed that China's economic growth would automatically push China towards liberal democracy. As Kishore Mahbubani stated, such assumptions did not appreciate the historical depth and resilience of Chinese civilization. He further argued, "Chinese civilization will have at least another 100 good years", emphasizing that China does not adopt the Western model.



source: https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2024/05/01/americans-remain-critical-of-china/

> **The United States lacks a coherent long-term strategy for dealing with China.**

As structural roots perpetuate tensions, this rivalry is not a foregone conclusion. There are indeed two principal reasons to think that the contest is avoidable.

First, the United States lacks a clear and coherent aim in this geopolitical competition. What does it aim to achieve? Is it trying to repeat the strategy of isolating China, as it did with the Soviet Union in the Cold War? Is it looking to overthrow the Communist Party? Is it to prevent China from becoming the world's largest economy? None of those aims has clear definitions or realistic considerations. As Henry Kissinger, the former U.S. Secretary of State, put it, the United States lacks any long-term strategy regarding its approach toward China.

Second, the deep and fundamental contradiction is not applicable here because the two countries, the U.S. and China, are interdependent in the economy. Besides, they provide trade benefits, and many have said that technology and climate change can benefit both. In addition, income inequality in the U.S. worsened in 2023, with a significant part of the American workforce not receiving any increment for decades. The best win-win opportunity with the Chinese is that if working with China allows ordinary Americans to get better wages and have more prosperous economic lives.

There are also global challenges that clearly require working with China. The COVID-19 pandemic left no doubt that our world is increasingly interconnected in the presence of shared-measurable pandemics: dependence on imported goods, financial instability, to mention a few ways in which problems may transcend political boundaries and call for collaborative action. As argued by Mahbubani and others, it is fundamentally in the world's interests to see a functioning partnership between the United States and China, not adversarial.

> **Despite tensions, both powers are economically interdependent and face shared global challenges requiring cooperation.**

While the U.S.–China competition appears entrenched, and seems likely to continue forever due to power politics, historical histories, and ideological animosities, it is still avoidable. The competition between the countries is sustained not just by policy choices, but by emotional legacy and misperceptions. If both countries really want to focus on the problems we face as humans, and their interdependent prosperity, then it gives a platform for cooperation. The same interdependence that makes war unthinkable also means that neither country wants to face a conflict where they lose, especially an open conflict. The future is unwritten, but it can still be written behind a barrier of restraint.